

WHY IS TOP 40 ON A DECLINE? GUY ZAPOLEON, PRESIDENT

ZAPOLEON CONSULTING, CHATS WITH GLOBAL MEDIA



In this January's set of Nielsen ratings, CHR stations across the US continued to decline. Powerhouse stations like Z100 in New York just managed to break into the top-ten ranking among people aged 6+, while KIIS FM in Los Angeles came in at 11th overall. In fact, in the ten biggest markets, CHR stations only managed to break into the top-five ranking in two markets: San Francisco (Bonneville's KMVQ) and Dallas (iHeart's KHKS).

This scenario is drastically different than what we were accustomed to seeing pre-pandemic as well as just three, four or even five years ago. While CHR continues to dominate the 18-34 segment with an 8.6% total week AQH share, CHR, as a format, is down from 10.1 in 2019 and 10.7 in 2018 (since 2015, CHR's share with 18-34 is down by 31% when it peaked with a 12.4).

We wanted to dig deeper into the current status of the CHR format and to gain some insight into what it might take to improve this situation. Helping us with this objective and sharing his extensive wisdom and knowledge on the topic is our dear friend Guy Zapoleon.

Guy, of course, hardly needs an introduction. During his stellar programming career he ran the legendary KZZP in Phoenix, built America's first Hot AC station (KHMx, Mix 96.5 in Houston), and was part of the successful launching team for WKTU in New York. In 1992 he founded his own consultancy firm, Zapoleon Media Strategies, and afterwards he served as SVP Programming Research and Strategy for iHeart Media. Throughout his illustrious run

Guy has also worked with Z100 in New York, KIIS FM in Los Angeles, and many other stations across the US, as well as 2Day FM in Australia, NRJ in Paris, and RTL in Berlin. We hope you find this a useful read!



– You’ve been the architect of some of the most successful Top 40 stations across the country and you’ve been an expert on the format for over four decades. What’s your take on the current state of CHR and why is the format going through this period of decline?

GZ – A big part of what hurt radio in 2020 and currently is the change in listening habits due to Covid-19. With everyone spending more time at home, there is more time spent on gaming as well as watching and streaming TV and films, which equates to less time listening to the radio. Also, people aren't driving nearly as much, and listening to the radio in the car is still the number one source of listening. Lastly, with more people working from home, there is significantly less at-work listening, which certainly hurts AC and Classic Hits stations, but also has had a major impact on Top 40 ones. We also have to factor in that radio is going through the most competitive period in its lifetime, while trying to remain the most dominant music distribution platform. And, while radio remains the most listened to platform for music, all of us are fully aware that the 12-24 demo spends more time on streaming platforms like Spotify, YouTube and others. Streaming overall has peeled off a lot of listening from radio, even with 25+ listeners. We're also definitely going through a "Doldrums period" for radio, which primarily impacts Top 40, as you can see in the ratings.



– Could you elaborate on this current down cycle or “Doldrums period,” and how the available music product, or lack thereof, is affecting the format?

GZ – I believe this is the worst “Doldrums period” ever. I have written at length about this, and it's never great when CHR spins the biggest hits of the year a lot less (based on the Billboard year-end charts) and replaces those spins with songs that aren't the biggest hits just because they fit the core Pop sound of Top 40. I believe that's where we are right now. Top 40 should continue to be a Pop-dominant format, but it can also do a better job of showcasing the diversity of genres that are available, be it Hip-Hop, Country, Alternative, AC, or any other genre. All of these genres combined represented 70% of the Billboard Top 100 hits in 2020, but Top-40 radio only spun 33% of those genres. So, I believe the answer is to strike a balance between the Billboard Top 100 and Top 40's genre percentage. To quote the late great Steve Rivers (AMFM's former Chief Programming Officer), “Always Play the Hits.” So, when you combine the Covid-19 effect, the increased number and usage of music platforms, and Top 40's lack of diversity as well as the fact that we're not always playing the biggest hits, it's no surprise that we have a perfect storm for the format.



– Given the current climate and with everything else going on, are there any stations that are doing a stellar job when it comes to embracing all genres of hit music?

GZ – No station, in my opinion, is executing the format musically exactly as I would because there is too much focus on how a song is performing on the charts by EVERYONE! Therefore, more songs get lost today than ever before. To give you an example, in 2020, only 28 songs were consensus A's, or in power rotation for most Top 40 stations, which is a record low in my 43 years of doing music/programming/consulting for Top 40 stations.

Having said that, there are several stations that are close to playing all genres of hits, including KYLD (Wild 94.9 in San Francisco), WXKS (Kiss 108 in Boston), KDWB (KDWB 101.3 in Minneapolis), WWPW (Power 96.1 in Atlanta), KIIS FM (102.7 KIIS FM in Los Angeles), and of

course WHZZ (Z100 in New York). All of these all really good in their own way. Mark Adams is great with KYLD which leans slightly rhythmic. You also have two straight down-the-middle, mainstream Top 40 stations: Mark Medina is really doing a good job with Z100 in New York as is Dan Hunt with Power 96.1 in Atlanta. Rich Davis at KDWB in Minneapolis, which is slightly more adult-leaning, definitely stands out. KIIS FM in Los Angeles, programmed by John Ivey and his Music Director, Beata Murphy, definitely deserves a mention. Both John and Beata have great ears, and Beata is masterful at scheduling and balancing the music mix. Overall, I'd have to say that Dylan Sprague, at Kiss 108 in Boston, which is a Mainstream Top 40 with a slight adult lean, is probably the closest to my Top 40 philosophy (I worked with him at WWWW in Atlanta).



– Let's talk about non-music factors, specifically on-air talent. Are CHR personalities not resonating with their respective targets like they once did? And what can we do as an industry to develop the next generation of talent?

GZ – So, I don't think the issue is that great personalities aren't resonating during Covid-19. It's more about how Covid-19 has changed our lifestyle, including all the shutdowns and having so many people now working from home. All of this has changed the way listeners are consuming media and specifically radio. We know there are still some great personalities in radio today and honestly, we just need more of them and more of them in all dayparts. We also need to invest and develop the next generation of personalities. Without great talent on the air today and developing outstanding new talent for tomorrow, radio, even music radio, is lost. Radio's essential difference is its great personalities, as the great Bill Lee said in one of your recent blogs (<http://globalmediarcp.com/news/radios-responses-coronavirus-crisis>). You need to ramp up existing and embrace new ways for talent to connect with listeners through social media, even video broadcasting, as well as in person (as Bill Lee alluded to). When we get to the "new normal," this will be the cure for your radio station and for radio, as an industry, to maintain and grow its listenership to our beloved platform throughout this decade and in the future.

Supporting today's air talent and developing tomorrow's generation is radio's last best hope. Additionally, it's always a good idea to ensure that content is great by revisiting some of the brilliant basics like word economy and writing and rewriting your content to make sure it's the very best it can be. To borrow from the late great Bill Tanner, he always prioritized "predictable unpredictability." This can best be defined as "witty, surprising, personable talent who delivered their content in a controlled and succinct manner." So, always be willing for a changeup or a slight twist in the way content is presented. Consider delivering totally surprising new material, whether it's personality liners, a bit, music, contests, events, guest appearances, etc. That's why, as programmers, it's so important to keep your listeners entertained and never knowing exactly what will happen next on the radio station; don't be afraid to embrace the FOMO Factor (Fear of Missing Out). And, speaking of FOMO, I wanted to reiterate Broadway Bill's idea of having radio do a video broadcast of their show. I believe we can do this in a similar way to the visual presentation that TV talk shows use today where guests or even listeners pop up in a single or even multiple "squares." This could add an entertaining and constantly surprising element to radio that doesn't exist now.

There are plenty of late-night talk show hosts on TV, such as Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, Andy Cohen with "Watch What Happens Live," and James Corden with his wonderful Karaoke Carpools... to name a few. Radio could definitely take a page from the brilliant way they all do their shows and interviews, the pairings of guests, and quirky questions. Clearly, the money invested on these shows and the freedom to be creative has paid off for sure.



– You were one of first programmers to understand and successfully implement research at your radio stations. Given the current economic climate and subsequent

cutbacks, research isn't always the top priority. In this day and age, how important is it to obtain relevant and timely insights from your target? Are there additional data sources that CHR stations should be consulting to ensure success?

GZ – Programming and perceptual research is absolutely essential to make sure you understand your station. Research enables you to uncover your station's images as well as to learn what challenges exist on the horizon. It allows you to dive deep into music imaging, talent, top of mind awareness, etc. Music research remains as essential as ever to make sure that the Current, Recurrent, and Gold songs you're playing are building a consensus with most of your audience and that the overall music mix for your target is accurate. As a mentor GM Dale Weber used to say to me, "there are three times in every business: time to make the rules, time to keep the rules, and time to re-invent the rules." Many people think that it's the latter and that we need to reinvent everything and throw out the old tools, but honestly that's a tragic mistake. For music, while I believe streaming data, Shazam, and sales are incredibly helpful in finding hits early and can even help you establish what the hits are, you can't get targeted information about songs without some type of local research (or from a very similar market/station). If you combine all of these resources, you can build a great research cocktail that will help you find the hits and to create an exciting music mix.



– In closing, what are some of the crucial steps that today's Top 40 Programmers and Brand Managers should take so that CHR can return to its glory days? And, just for fun, if you were back in the programming chair what would you do differently, what would you do the same, and how would you approach the job overall?

GZ – If I was PD again, it's not a surprise that I'd be employing radio's brilliant basics, but the solutions obviously have evolved. All the elements that make a great station with an exciting music mix, discovery of new music, playing multiple music genres, should all be a part of your Top 40 station. I'm a big proponent of that. Your on-air talent should also keep looking for new ways to make that indelible connection with the listener, to make your station an essential part of their lives. The CHR stations that are still doing much better than average are the stations with strong long-term morning shows. But it's more than just a morning show, we should have great talent in every daypart. A perfect example of this is KS95 in Minneapolis (a Hot AC) which not only has a strong morning show, but a legendary and highly rated afternoon show (Moon & Stacey, now billed as Stacey & Hutch). I would love to see visual component/video broadcasting, or Facetime Live for all talent, or at least every talent that warrants it at your station. Certainly, contesting and station events remain incredibly important ways to connect with listeners, and I think charitable outreach is now more important than ever before in order to help and connect with your audience. Before deregulation happened, radio was expected to operate for the public good. Now, in these very tough times, a great radio station uses charitable events and survival information to help rescue listeners who are struggling. In this past year as all of us have had to endure life during Covid-19, great stations have risen to the occasion to help listeners that are struggling with basic needs, such as food, water, money, and have been instrumental to distribute simple information about how and where to get a vaccine. Radio can and should help to take care of its listeners.
